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FORCE LEVEL REVIEW AUGUST 2005

I enclose the MND (SE) Force Level Review, completed as a joint exercise between your team and the staff here. I believe it to be a fairly conducted yet rigorous reassessment of the level of forces required, which makes realistic recommendations based on our current estimation of the way that events will unfold.

It must however come with a severe health warning. This week was chosen for the Review because by now the Constitution should have been written and agreed by the Iraqi Transitional Government. In the event we are at a period of considerable uncertainty and planning with exactitude for future force reductions against that background is difficult. I am entirely content with the TELIC 7 force level deductions but would urge considerable caution beyond that. My predecessor's proposed timelines for assumption of tactical and operational overwatch were an informed guess, the main value of which was to induce a mindset of eventual drawdown and to initiate the required detailed staff work.

The first stage (Muthanna and Maysan) is relatively simple because we will still have forces at hand able to re-engage. However the dates for assumption of operational overwatch in Basra and Dhi Qar are much more tentative and fundamentally reliant on factors beyond our control. Many of these factors are political, and we should refrain from making even tentative military decisions on reduction based on second-guessing political outcomes. You are familiar with the arguments, but, for example, a precipitate Italian withdrawal or a downturn in the security situation, following failure at some stage of the Iraqi political process, could leave us unacceptably exposed.

must therefore reiterate the point that 19 sub units for TELIC 8 is a reasonable assumption, but any notion that we can drive down numbers with any degree of certainty beyond that is a false one. We should certainly look to warn off the units that may be required and then 'off-ramp' them, rather than find ourselves having to generate units at short notice. What might start to give us more clarity on the issue of UK force levels is to more actively engage our coalition partners in our planning and establish their likely positions.

To stress the point further, I have just returned from the Senior National Commanders' Conference in Baghdad, where the 'conditions-based' criteria for handover of Provinces to Provincial Iraqi Security Control (PISC) was again emphasised. It will be the task of the 'Joint Committee to Transfer Security Responsibility' (JCTSR) chaired by the PM which actually takes the decision, so in all of this, we are not masters of our own destiny.

The last thing I want to do is to appear to question my predecessor's optimistic assumptions, but I feel that I must inject a note of caution in recognition of the risks and uncertainties involved. We must not allow our efficient staffing processes to get ahead of reality. If we do we will find ourselves having to explain apparent failure in MOD and Whitehall because we ourselves raised expectations unrealistically.